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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges regularly faced in the teaching of writing methods to preservice teachers is the students' lack of models for process writing. Students in methods courses most often come into the course with no experience with using process writing methods. Process writing is an approach that is very different from traditional writing instruction. In one particular methods course, the method used to introduce elementary education majors to the process writing approach was to require them to take part in such an approach. Before beginning the writing process cycle, the students are introduced to the concept of process writing through lecture, class discussions, and readings. Peer conferencing is an important feature of process writing. It is also the most difficulty for many of these students because they find it threatening; nevertheless it is in this area of peer conferencing that most students show a change in their attitude toward process writing. In the journals, students often remark that peer conferencing was not only painless but finally quite helpful. After the initial period of instruction, students proceed to consider audience, function, and format elements in reference to a piece that they will write. Students have free choice of topics and of formats for their writing. At the conclusion of the last conference, students have about 3 weeks to produce a "tentative final draft" of their written piece. (TB)

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# TEACHERS OF WRITING MUST WRITE FIRST

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# TEACHERS OF WRITING MUST WRITE FIRST

One of the greatest challenges regularly faced in the teaching of writing methods to preservice teachers is the students' lack of models for process writing. Students in methods courses most often come to into the course with no experience with using process writing methods. Process writing is an approach to writing that is very different from traditional writing instruction. If teachers of literacy methods want their students to use process writing methods in their instruction, they first need to increase the students' awareness of the differences and similarities between traditional writing instruction and modern process writing instruction.

## The Task

The approach used to teaching process writing to elementary education majors in literacy methods courses is initially to have them experience process writing as students, that is, as writers. For this assignment, over the course of several weeks the students write at least two drafts of a written piece, and take part in at least three peer conferences about their writing.

Before beginning the process writing cycle, students in the course are introduced the idea of writing as a process which results in a product rather than simply a product that appears more or less of its own accord. This is done through lectures and class discussions, as well as textbook chapters and prepared written handouts. The materials discuss the idea of stages of a written piece: prewriting, drafting and revising, and editing. Various

novel concepts are emphasized: the importance of audience variation (Who will read this piece, and what do they need to know?) and writing function (What is the purpose of this piece and how can I fulfill it?). An effort is made to broaden the students' notion of appropriate writing formats such as poetry, plays, interviews, posters, word problems, vignettes, character sketches, dialogues, persuasion, directions, and many others. Traditional writing instruction tends to view writing formats very narrowly, which has a dampening effect on the writers' production.

Peer conferencing is an important feature of process writing. However, for many of these students, peer conferencing is a difficult task. Frequently this is their first experience with sharing their writing with other writers, and it is often extremely threatening to them. Initially they were provided with a list of the concerns that writers have at each stage, and it was assumed that the students would intuitively know how to use this list to structure a writing conference; however, the initial students' written reactions to this process showed that this assumption was faulty. Subsequently two classes of graduate students to assisted in the development of a set of appropriate questions for peers to use at conferences at each stage of the writing process. Using these questions has proven to be very helpful to later students, as their written reactions show.

It is in this area of peer conferencing that most students show a change in their attitude toward process writing. In their reflective essays, students often remark that, although the idea of sharing their writing with peers was initially very threatening, it

turned out to be painless, even helpful to their writing. This is a particular valuable result of the use of this assignment. It is quite likely that students who were uncomfortable with this procedure would hesitate to use process writing in their instruction. Through their experiences in process writing in their literacy methods course, these students are more likely to use process writing than previously.

The Writing Cycle

After the initial period of instruction, the students proceed to consider the audience, function, and format elements in reference to a piece that they will write. The students have free choice of topics and of formats for their writing. They may even elect to write a piece that is required for another class, since the emphasis for this course is on the process rather than the product. When they have chosen a tentative topic and format for their written piece, the students bring their ideas to a prewriting conference with up to three peers. In the prewriting conference, the students discuss their planned topics and formats, using the questions provided if they choose to do so. After this conference they have about three weeks to write a first draft of their piece.

They bring this first draft to a second conference, the purpose of which is to guide revision of the written piece. At this point, most writers have some concerns about their written piece. Perhaps they may wonder if the writing is sufficiently specific, if the language is clear, whether or not it make it's intended impact, if is it organized appropriately, or other concerns. They share

these concerns with their peers, who they read each other's writing and respond. Students have the choice of whether or not to take the advice given by their peers; the requirement of the project is that they consider the comments, and in their reflective essay discuss whether or not they decided to take their peers' advice, and why.

At the conclusion of this conference, the students have about three weeks to produce a tentative final draft of their written piece. This oxymoronic phrase, "tentative final draft," is used for an important reason. Because these students have only experienced traditional writing instruction, they are accustomed to producing writing completely independently; they expect to produce a final draft that is ready to be handed in. However, a critical feature of process writing is that the writers' peers should have a hand in the various stages, and that includes proofreading. So students are asked to complete a *tentative* final draft which will be exchanged with a peer and proofread by that person. Students are encouraged to make the minor corrections that are required at this point and then hand in the written piece.

The written piece are scored according to several criteria: thoughtful completion of the conference documentation, appropriateness of the finished product in relation to the student's goal for the piece, and the thoroughness and insight shown in the reflective essay. The reflective essays are carefully examined to gather evaluative information about the instruction the writers excperienced, and to organize future instruction.

New Directions

The change in attitude toward peer conferencing is one of the positive results of using this procedure with these students. Another positive result is that students often say that, while before this project they were unclear about exactly how the stages worked, afterwards, they understood much better. They state that the project allowed them to empathize with what their future students might be feeling during writing instruction, and that this empathy will help them to structure their teaching to deal with these feelings, and ultimately improve their students' writing.

In their reflective essays, students also express a number of concerns about using the writing process in their instruction. They are often worried about the time that is necessary for implementing process writing in the classroom. They also express concern about the ability of children in the primary grades to perform the conferencing and peer - editing tasks required. In the future, instruction in these literacy methods courses will include more information about these topics.

This procedure has been used to introduce process writing to preservice teachers since I began teaching at Coastal four years ago. However, from the most recent students' reflective essays, the need for a change in this routine has become apparent. A higher percentage of students now have at least some experience with process writing, either from their high school or college classes, or from their early education field experiences. These students find this very introductory process writing project to be a

repetition of experiences they already possess. For these students, a more advanced project will need to be developed.

This is a very positive development which indicates that process writing is beginning to be much more well represented in elementary and secondary education than it previously has been. Those of us who teach literacy methods courses look forward to the future challenge of teaching writing methods to students who have all had some experience with process writing.